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WILLIAM WILBERFORCE: INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND POLITICS

Katie Mechem
Christianity in Britain Prep
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Often in churches today, politics and Christianity remain separate from one another. Christians are told to be in the world, not of it. Many people take this reference from John 17 as a call to let politics fall where they may and focus on upholding moral standards individually. William Wilberforce is an eighteenth-century example of a man who mixed faith and politics. He felt God calling him “to be a Christian politician, [...] not just a politician who happened to be Christian.”¹ Wilberforce took up the cause of the abolition of the slave trade to uphold God’s love and mercy for all people. In a time where Christianity was not well received or accepted, he chose to take a stand against one of the greatest injustices of all time, from a moral and biblical standpoint. William Wilberforce is an important figure in British history because he set the example of how to successfully integrate faith into every aspect of life. He made it his goal to appeal to the conscience of Britain, to prevent ignorance, and to address the values of the church. Wilberforce accomplished all of this by diving into the center of controversy, the political sphere of Parliament.

William Wilberforce was born on August 24, 1759 in the city of Hull. His family belonged to a class of wealthy merchants who lived in a mansion overlooking the Hull River. When his father died, William was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Wimbledon. William’s aunt and uncle’s greatest contribution to his life was spiritual. They were “at the epicenter of a spiritual renaissance in England” called Methodism and they shared this revival with William.² His aunt and uncle were friends with some of the most influential figures of the 18th century,

¹ John White, “Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (2012): 167.

² Eric Metaxas. *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the heroic campaign to end slavery*. (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 6.

including George Whitefield and John Newton, who played an incredible role in developing William's beliefs. Newton and the Wilberforce family became very close. Being a former slave trader, Newton was the man who introduced William to the horrors of the slave trade. Under his aunt and uncle's influence, William adopted more and more Methodist beliefs. During this time, Methodism was something feared and despised by elites, including William's mother and grandfather. When William's mother discovered his newfound beliefs, she removed him from his aunt and uncles and brought him home. William's mother forbade him from attending church and William struggled to maintain his faith. By age sixteen, Wilberforce had grown out of his Methodist faith and began to focus on his scholarship.

Wilberforce entered St. John's College at Cambridge at age seventeen. It was here that he was introduced to "an environment of [...] aggressive debauchery."³ His colleagues drank hard, gambled often, and spoke foully. William was discouraged from studying which led to lifelong struggles with self-discipline. Instead of studying, William spent his time entertaining others. He became quite popular at St. John's for his quick wit, eloquence, and love of society. He also became very good friends with William Pitt, the son of the prime minister. It is from Pitt that Wilberforce acquired a passion for politics.

This passion led him to campaign for his place in the House of Commons. At age twenty-one, he was elected to Parliament. Eventually, his seat in Parliament moved from the district of Hull to the most coveted district of York, arguably the best seat in Parliament. William began to

³ Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 17.

be widely recognized by London society for his social gifts. His life was basically an extension of his life at Cambridge where he drank, danced, and sang the nights away.

At this point in William's life, he viewed Methodism the same way as the rest of England. He believed Methodists "carried things a bit too far" and were out-of-touch with the reality in which they lived.⁴ To Wilberforce, the ideas of the Bible and of Christianity were old and outdated—believing or applying them to one's life was unrealistic. This all began to change because of his friendship with Isaac Milner, his former teacher and a proud Methodist. William's conversations and developing friendship with Milner planted a seed of spiritual revival in him.

While learning about the Gospel from Milner, they discussed the book *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* by Philip Doddridge. It was this book that convicted Wilberforce. Doddridge's comments about the 'careless sinner' especially resonated with him. Doddridge described a 'careless sinner' as a man who is moral and possibly even religious but who lacks the one thing essential to salvation.⁵ Doddridge asserted that purely moral men are not justified before God because "true religion is an all-absorbing sense of God's presence and love."⁶ This version of Christianity, the one Wilberforce was lacking, should completely change the way a person lives their life. Once Wilberforce realized this, his life was never the same. This change manifested itself into a life-long battle of fighting for social justice. Wilberforce's response to accepting and believing the Gospel was to use his influence in Parliament to stop the slave trade, changing the conscience of Britain one step at a time.

⁴ Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 45.

⁵ Jonathan Bayes "William Wilberforce: His Impact on Nineteenth-Century Society," *Churchman* 108, no. 2 (1994): 123.

⁶ Bayes, "William Wilberforce: His Impact on Nineteenth-Century Society," 123.

Wilberforce felt God calling him to use his influence in Parliament to fight for the abolition of the slave trade. In order to fight this fight effectively, he formed a group called the Clapham Sect who rallied behind him, gained support for the movement, and researched the facts behind the slave trade. With the help of Thomas Clarkson, the main researcher, Wilberforce amassed as much information about the slave trade as possible. Thomas Clarkson's dedication to the cause allowed him to learn more and more about the horrors of the slave trade. It became clear to everyone who was involved that the slave trade "corrupted and ruined the lives of all who touched it."⁷ Once Wilberforce realized this, he put everything he had into stopping it.

In December of 1787, Wilberforce put forth the motion in the House of Commons to abolish the slave trade. Unfortunately for Wilberforce and fellow abolitionists, Parliament members were unmoved. It was not until 1807, twenty years later, that the hearts of Parliament began to thaw. The bill "for the Abolition of the Slave Trade" made it all the way to its third and final reading in the House of Commons.⁸ After the reading, the House of Commons voted in favor of abolition. After twenty long years, they had finally abolished the slave trade in Great Britain.

William Wilberforce was successful in using politics to highlight the decaying morals in British society. The mere fact that it took twenty years for Parliament to abolish the slave trade, even after the evils were exposed, speaks to the decay of culture and morals in eighteenth-century society. Wilberforce's goal was not just to change the law, but to change the conscience of the nation.⁹ He accomplished his goal by maintaining his faith in Christ as his driving force. Wilberforce's faith gave him a new perspective. By recognizing the depth of his own sin, he was

⁷ Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 116.

⁸ Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 206.

⁹ White, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," 170.

able to acknowledge that everyone was to blame for the evils committed in this world, including himself. The only thing he could do was work as hard as he could to promote God's kingdom. Wilberforce brought all the facts of the slave trade to the surface, no matter how gruesome, because as a Christian he could not watch this injustice go on. Through his work in politics, he was able to expose everyone to the truth so that no one could plead ignorance. By appealing to everyone's conscience, Wilberforce hoped to change the "underlying culture of England in order to change its laws and government for the long term."¹⁰

Wilberforce above all recognized his need for a Savior and his ultimate reliance on Christ. There are some who criticize Wilberforce of focusing more on his works than on sharing the Gospel, in essence trying to earn God's grace. Though Wilberforce did struggle with guilt over his sinful past, he was the biggest advocate for viewing Jesus' sacrifice as a gift, one that he could never earn. He also realized the human tendency to find salvation in one's actions and achievements. Wilberforce understood that mankind is justified by faith alone; however, he believed "that real Christianity is a commitment which demands the totality of a person's life, doing everything to the glory of God."¹¹ Therefore, Wilberforce dedicated his life to ending the slave trade. His faith never discouraged him from getting involved in politics. In fact, his faith prompted him to fight even harder for what he believed in. Wilberforce realized that to truly call himself a Christian politician, "he must seek to influence all levels of society, making government a force of good for all."¹² The best way for him to enact change in his society was to fight from the inside, promoting justice as well as sharing the gift of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ White, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," 170.

¹¹ Bayes, "William Wilberforce: His Impact on Nineteenth-Century Society," 128.

¹² White, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," 172.

One of Wilberforce's greatest criticisms for the eighteenth-century church was a lack of spiritual passion. He described the church body as being lukewarm.¹³ Christians seemed to view church as a social propriety, one where they were present but their minds and hearts were not engaged. There was no passion behind their belief, nothing to fuel their faith and turn it into action. Wilberforce wholeheartedly believed in the necessity of passion in true religion. He argued that passions are completely rational and are "grounded in knowledge."¹⁴ To Wilberforce, without spiritual passion, one will fail to recognize the promotion of God's kingdom as the most important job. He believed that a follower of Christ is not completely transformed until one experiences an overwhelming desire to dedicate one's life to serving Christ. Wilberforce stressed the importance of true restoration, living "a God-centered rather than a self-serving way of life."¹⁵ He used his passion for social justice to show God's love to all people at all times. William Wilberforce lived his life as an example to the Christians around him.

Wilberforce's challenge does not end in the eighteenth-century. He warned about a time when Christianity's influence in society would wane and become more openly rejected.¹⁶ Today more than ever, Christianity is not accepted and not wanted in political society. Wilberforce fought for biblical justice in Parliament at a time when it was more socially acceptable to ignore the injustices of the world. His example "shows that Christianity can be a powerful and guiding force in politics."¹⁷ Without Christian passion and action in society, Christians are being ignorant

¹³ William Wilberforce, *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 37.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Greenman, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (2012): 190.

¹⁵ Greenman, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," 190.

¹⁶ Bayes, "William Wilberforce: His Impact on Nineteenth-Century Society," 133.

¹⁷ White, "Anglican Evangelicals on Personal and Social Ethics," 171.

to the problems and the needs of the nation. Wilberforce understood that and stressed his belief that, “a private faith that does not act in the face of oppression is no faith at all.”¹⁸

William Wilberforce’s contribution to ending the social injustices of the eighteenth-century is indisputable. He dedicated his life to fighting for the oppressed and the voiceless, fighting for twenty long years to abolish the slave trade. Wilberforce used his influence in the government to promote God’s kingdom and emphasize the importance of biblical ethics and strong morals. His goal was to change the conscience of Britain, to eliminate ignorance, and to challenge the values of the eighteenth-century church. Wilberforce was successful in changing the culture of eighteenth-century Britain and planting a seed for spiritual revival in the hearts of Christians. Wilberforce did all this because of his deep, life-altering faith in Christ. It was his all-consuming faith that prompted him to fight injustice and to be God’s hands and feet within the political center of Great Britain. His faith in Jesus Christ, and nothing else, influenced him to act and encourages people now to stand up against injustice.

¹⁸ Charles Colson, Introduction to *A Practical View of Christianity*, ed. Kevin Charles Belmonte, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), xxiii.

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